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ABSTRACT

Little research exists that examines how children experience listening to stories, and few studies have been done that ask students to discuss their own experience with storytelling. A qualitative grounded study designed to focus upon children's responses and experiences to storytelling in the classroom was conducted in a public middle school in a New England mill town with eight fourth and fifth grade students. These children came from white, working class, and middle class families and were attending a special needs classroom for "academic support" in reading during a part of their school day. Every other week, the researcher came into the classroom and told stories for about 45 minutes per session to these students. The "telling style" is described as theatrical and interactive, with no set text or script. After the sessions, students met with the researcher in interview groups. Over and over again, they tried to describe what it was like to be listeners. The act of listening to a story was a powerful and creative experience, one that was perceived as active and inclusive. The idea that the listener is somehow controlling the story is probably the most important finding to emerge from the data. Students described an act of co-participation with the storyteller, because listening to a story for them was an interactive experience. Findings suggest that storytelling is an empowering form of communication. (NKA)

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by Robin Mello

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"Creating Pictures in My Mind": A Qualitative Study of Children's Responses to Storytelling in the Classroom

by Robin Mello

Researcher: *Well . . . that happens when you listen to a story?*
TR: *. . . I have a picture in my mind.*
Susan: *I think, what is [the storyteller] going to do next? . . . Is she going to scream or is she just going to start crying? Is she going to faint?*
Theresa: *Is she going to die?*
TR: *Is she going to fall off the mountain?*

In that time long ago when humans first created language, stories were told aloud. Writing hadn't been created yet, storytelling was the form for disseminating literature and stories were the texts. Since that primeval time, stories have been the way in which people around the earth make meaning and create connections between themselves and their world. Storytelling has continued to play a key role in teaching, learning, and cultural development even in modern day contexts. Despite print, television and computer technology, traditional storytelling still plays a part in educational environments.

Teachers these days use stories to engage the imagination and encourage the "literary cycle in which children listen to stories, tell their stories, write stories, and finally read their own stories as others listen which begins the whole cycle over again" (Wellhousen, 1993, p. 62). In primary grades especially, an emphasis on telling and reading aloud to children has been, and is now, highly regarded as a method for engaging pre-readers' interest and understanding of literacy skills. It is only recently, however, that we have begun to take an in-depth look into what happens when we tell stories to children. In fact, very little research exists that examines how children experience listening to stories and few studies have been done that ask students to discuss their own experience with storytelling.

In response to the paucity of research in this area — and because I am both a teacher as well as a professional storyteller — I decided to conduct a qualitative grounded study designed to focus upon children's responses and experiences to storytelling in the classroom. What, I wondered, might children have to say about their experience of story? What was happening inside the minds of

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students as they listened and reacted? What kinds of connections might they make between listening to storytelling and other types of listening experiences such as watching television, reading aloud, or listening to music?

Susan: *Reading [to yourself] is really boring [but] when someone tells you a story it's wicked fun.* [1]

My informants were eight fourth and fifth grade students attending a public middle school in a small New England mill town. These children came from white, working class and middle class families, were of Franco-American and "Yankee" heritage, had been living within the city limits for at least three years, and were attending a special needs classroom for "academic support" in reading during a portion of their school day. Their teacher, an educator with twenty years teaching experience, consistently extended and enriched her curriculum by providing students with opportunities to hear literature read aloud but, until this study took place, she had never told a story to her students without using a book.

Every other week, during the duration of the study, I came into the classroom and told stories for approximately forty-five minutes per session, to these students. My telling style was, and is, interactive and theatrical; there is no set text or script. The stories themselves came from a wide variety of sources and cultures including tales from Germany, Egypt, Kenya, The Pacific Northwest, and Appalachia. In addition to world tales, I also told a variety of personal memories and family stories as well.

After the storytelling sessions, students met with me in interview groups. Interviews were taped for future transcription and made up the bulk of the data. These interview sessions often lasted for over an hour; most of the time it was a struggle to end the interviews because students didn't want to stop talking about their impressions and experiences as listeners. The participating teacher was amazed. She had reported to me, before the study began, that these students "had a short attention span." Yet, during storytelling and interview sessions, they participated without exhibiting any disruptive behavior and often asked for "more stories," expressing disapointment when interviews ended. In addition, students often talked about what had been said in previous conversations and brought up illustrative points regarding their thinking on the research questions, demonstrating a significant level of reflectivity and curiosity about the subject of the study. This deep reflectivity on the part of the participants helped to establish "thick data" (Geertz, 1995) leaving me with the impression that students had given "authentic" (Ely, et al., 1993) accounts of their own thinking.

The Power of Listening

Over and over again, during

interviews, students tried to describe what it was like to be listeners. Students discussed their delight at being able to "think of things differently," and "being a part of making the story happen." The act of listening to a story, was for them, a powerful and creative experience, one that was perceived as active and inclusive.

This idea, that the listener is somehow controlling the story, was probably the most important finding to emerge from the data. For example, when asked to discuss: "What happens when you listen to a story?" students repeatedly defined their listening as proactive by using words expressing participation and involvement. Conversations were full of phrases such as "I saw," "I used," "I climbed," "I imaged," "I acted," and "I put a picture in my mind."

Theresa: *You said there was a mountain and . . . I put a mountain in my mind.*

Mike: *Yeah. I just kind of stuck it right in my head and try to visualize it actually there and the [storyteller] is doing it at the same time.*

Jack: *. . . I imagined that you were in a tiny boat . . .*

TR: *I did that too!*

Theresa: *When you were pulling up people [in the story] I imagined that you were pulling up real drowning people. If you act it out it comes to my mind, and then I imagine it.*

Susan: *. . . When [you] were talking. . . I kept seeing this big man reaching up and grabbing some cloud, rolling it and heaving it down.*

According to the students, another important function of listening to stories was watching the storyteller "take control" of the text. Students implied that they felt they were co-creators of the story because they were watching another human being use words to "do whatever you want to do." A storyteller, they observed, is a person who is in control of "making" and "changing" a tale. The storyteller was in charge to such a degree that "nothing in a story [you tell] ever goes wrong." "When you tell a story," one student told me, "you show" because "storytelling is sort of acting, exaggerating" and it has "action in it, acting it out as if it was really happening."

TR: *[If I was telling] a story I would probably go on for an hour if I wanted to say one word or another, I can all of a sudden just pop something off my head and just add it right to the story . . .*

Susan: *I know that the person [telling the story] is doing it the right way, or the way they think is right, instead of reading the wrong words and*

skipping lines and not making a lot of sense.

Teresa: *Yeah . . . Because when I hear stories I think differently . . . There's excitement [in story-telling] and boredom when I read. When I read there's boredom and then when people tell there's some excitement.*

Creative Storytelling

In their attempt to define and discuss their experience as consumers of stories, students described storytelling and story-listening as an action observing that "listening to a story is making pictures in my head," or "story-telling is making a story come to life [for the listener]." Prior to conducting this research, I had assumed that hearing a story told aloud was an auditory experience. In addition, I had always believed the role of the listener — while vitally important (how can anyone tell a story if there is no one around to listen and respond?) — was passive. I discovered instead that these students perceived the role of listener as both creative and active, story consumers who could, through visualizing the action, control the storyteller's technique. When these students listened to stories, they said they became interpreters of the story by creating "pictures," "visualizing" images, and "acting out the voices" in their minds.

Mike: *Whenever I saw the story, I saw you and then I saw the little kid in the car and then I saw the car. You know how cars go straight? I saw it swerving every time you looked at him.*

Researcher: *You saw what the car was doing every time I talked about the car?*

Mike: *I imagined that you were going down the road looking at him turning a little bit.*

Creating A Book Inside My Mind

What students described was an act of co-participation because listening to a story, for them, was an interactive experience. The teller and the listener, according to my informants, are co-creators of story; both the teller and the listener "go through" the storytelling experience together. One student observed that "the teller makes" and the listener "sees the pictures." Listener and teller are connected, working with each other to create a shared experience.

Cindy: *When you started to tell . . . I pretended that [the girl in the story] was me. I had the same problem . . . I was having a hard time.*

Mike: *It's like you (the teller) are giving us a blank book with no words in it with just pictures and you are*

the tape and you just tell us and we have to flip the book [to see the pictures] in our mind.

Storytelling seemed to give these students an opportunity to be in control, to get "better" stories, because they had a chance to create an imaginary "book [with] their minds." Storytelling was also perceived to be different from television viewing, watching movies or listening to a book read aloud. When asked why they thought this was so, one student said it was because he could "imagine it in my own way." In addition, all the students involved in this study vehemently agreed that listening to a story told aloud was <u>better</u> than watching television!

TR: *Telling stories from your mouth is sort of like a movie, you're acting like on TV. . . but I'm watching you and using my brain . . . I don't have to use my brain when I watch TV.*

Mike: *Whenever I watch TV shows I don't have to think or anything. I don't have to imagine anything. I think stories are funner because they don't make me rot my brain . . .Whenever you [tell] a story we act it out in our heads and we don't have to do that [when we watch TV]. We don't have to do much when we're watching TV.*

In addition, the listener, according to my informants, has the power to change the telling and the teller whenever s/he wants to.

Teresa: *If you (Robin) are wearing plain old black I could imagine. If we are just looking at you and you are telling the story, then we are just trying to picture it in our heads. We could make you wear blue jeans or purple jeans or a purple shirt or a red shirt or a green shirt. We could change the color [and] not give you glasses.*

When children listen to storytelling, students said, they are participating in a creative activity. By "imaging" the story, students become creators of evocative imaginary worlds.

Mike: *It was like some old lady I saw walking down the street . . . I just put her in the story and just saw that old woman.*

They invent spontaneously, seeing images, filling in gaps in plots and adding original details.

Mike: *It's more fun to hear stories because then I can make it up the*

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way I want.

Susan: *Yeah I can also make it up. . .*

Teresa: *I can't actually stick my imagination into the TV, I can't tell them what to do [on TV], 'cause the directors tell me what to do, when [the teller tells a story] we can actually do what ever we want as if we were the director. . .*

Listening to a story gives the listener an opportunity to act, control, and create. The listener is the maker of the story that the storyteller tells and is in charge of "the pictures in my mind" as they listen.

For the students who participated in this study, storytelling and storylistening events became powerful participatory experiences, ones that involved them in partnerships with the teller. These students took responsibility for the story by creating their own individual worlds of words and images.

Alex: *Telling a story helps my imagination . . . better if someone tells me a story . . . If I don't have a good imagination it helps.*

Implications

This study suggests that storytelling is an empowering form of communication, one that includes both teller and listener in the work of "picturing the words," creating texts that come alive within the imagination. Students, in this study, reacted deeply and meaningfully when they heard stories told aloud, indicating that storytelling is an effective way to engage students actively in language arts. In a world of technology and media entertainment, where teachers perceive themselves as 'competing against the television', it is important to note that the worlds' oldest literacy, storytelling, is still, according to students, "more fun than watching TV." Storytelling is a 'hands-on' experience, one which listeners perceive as a viable interactive alternative to computers, television and reading aloud.

Findings from this study are encouraging. Educators need to take another look at the personal art of telling, understanding that sharing stories with children is a participatory, active and creative exercise. We need to remember storytelling and include it in the classroom. As one of the students involved in this study wisely observed, "[storytelling] is listening work, where you have to use your mind, but it's fun . . . a story is work for your ears and your eyes . . . storytelling is good work."

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Footnote

[1]Data quoted here are selected excerpts taken from transcripts of interviews collected during this study. Data used in this article are indicative and representative of students' responses. In addition, the names of the students have been changed to assure student anonymity.

Robin Mello is a storyteller, artist-educator and qualitative researcher. She teaches storytelling courses for Lesley College's Creative Arts In Learning Program and is also a "scientific storyteller" at the Museum of Science in Boston. She is currently a research associate for the Program Evaluation Research Group at Lesley.

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